

Elephant Seals in Tasmania

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Introduction

The present Tasmanian coastlines were formed 6,000 to 7,000 years ago due to rises in sea levels (Jennings 1971). Remains of Elephant Seals *Mirounga leonina* (L.) have been found at sites on the far North-west and West coasts of Tasmania at Rocky Cape, West Point, Sundown Point and Venables Point (Jones 1966; Stockton 1982). Jones (1966) estimated that there were the remains of several thousand seals at West Point including seals of 3 to 4 months old. This suggests that a pre-historic breeding colony existed somewhere close on the West Coast despite Stockton's (1982) assertion that the remains may have come from dead, tired or sick seals that ended up on the coast.

At the time of European arrival in the late 1790s there were large breeding colonies of Elephant Seals at Sea Elephant Bay on King Island, New Year Islands and somewhere in the Hunters Isles (Micco 1971). Vagrants occurred at the Two Sisters in the Furneaux Group while the aborigines of Port Jackson knew them by the name of 'Miroung' (Micco 1971). The size of the colonies is not known.

Within a few years of their discovery the sealing industry caused the extinction of the Elephant Seals together with Fur Seals and Sea Lions. Recently there was talk of taking Elephant Seal pups from Macquarie Island and re-establishing them on King Island as a Bicentenary Project (Smith 1986, King Island News 2 April 1986). Nothing came out of this suggestion. Today Elephant Seals are uncommon visitors to Tasmania.

Live Seal Recordings in Tasmania since 1977

Twenty-five records of live seals are known from 1977 to June 1989 (Table 1,

Fig. 1). The recordings were made by staff from the Department of Parks, Wildlife and Heritage and from the general public that have been followed up by the Department. Sightings of live seals have been recorded on the Department's computerised TASPAWS biological records scheme. There are almost no records of Elephant Seals prior to 1977 which may express the lack of awareness of people to record seals. There are four records of dead beach washed seals, three in Southern Tasmania and one at Ocean Beach near Strahan. Records of live seals at sea include one spotted 40 kilometres north of Bruny Island and another sighted 2 kilometres off-shore Three Hummock Island in Northwest Tasmania.

The live observations are mainly from southern Tasmania, aided by the fact that it is a more populated region and more of the coastline is constantly under observation than in other parts of Tasmania. It is also the nearest landing for seals from Macquarie Island which is the closest major breeding colony to Tasmania of some 100,000 seals (Hindell and Burton 1988). The majority of seals were only ashore for one to two days. Two were present for three weeks, a female on the Coal River at Richmond and a large male which moved between Adventure Bay and various places on the Derwent River near Hobart from January to 15 February 1982. About twice as many males visited compared to females. The males varied greatly in size and thus age.

There are only two records in the 11 years of females giving birth, both at Maatsuyker Island. These records were the result of a determined search of relatively inaccessible bays on the island. In addition lighthouse keepers and fishermen have seen Elephant Seals on Maatsuyker Island over the years (R. Westcott pers. comm.). It is therefore possible that Elephant Seals

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may breed there. This now brings to four the number of known births reported from Tasmania in modern times. The previous two were at Strahan on the West Coast in 1985 (Davies 1963) and near St. Helens on the East Coast in 1975 (Tyson 1977).

The historic restriction of Elephant Seals to northwest Tasmania may be partially explained by the distribution of their principal food, squid. The relative abundance of the Arrow Squid *Notodarus gouldi* is higher in western Bass Strait than in eastern Bass Strait (Roberts 1982). To the present day very few sightings of Elephant Seals have occurred in this region. The paucity of visitors to Tasmania indicates only that the state is within the dispersal range of the seals from Macquarie Island. It will be many years, if ever before Elephant Seals will re-colonise Tasmania.

References

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Table 1. Recordings of live *Mirounga leonina* in Tasmania.

Date	Sex	Age/Size	Locality	Lat.	Long.
11 Jan 1977			New Harbour	43°31'S.,	146°09'E.
12 Jan 1977	F & Pup		Maatsuyker Island	43°39'S.,	146°17'E.
7 Aug 1978	M		Cape Boullanger	42°34'S.,	148°04'E.
19 Nov 1978	F		Adventure Bay	43°19'S.,	147°20'E.
18 Dec 1974		Immature	Carlton River	42°50'S.,	147°44'E.
11 Mar 1980	M	5 m	Cloudy Bay	43°28'S.,	147°13'E.
17 Oct 1980	F	1.77 m	Lauderdale	42°55'S.,	147°29'E.
1 Dec 1980		Immature	Recherche Bay	43°33'S.,	146°54'E.
13 Mar 1981	M	2.75 m	Lighthouse Bay	43°30'S.,	147°09'E.
20 Dec 1981	F	2.45 m	Richmond	42°44'S.,	146°26'E.
19 Jan 1982	M	5 m	Adventure Bay	43°19'S.,	147°20'E.
21 Feb 1982	M		Cox's Bight	43°30'S.,	146°15'E.
Feb 1982	M	Immature	Taroona	42°57'S.,	147°21'E.
31 Aug 1982			Ocean Beach	42°10'S.,	145°15'E.
11 Dec 1982	M	2 m	Pirates Bay	43°01'S.,	147°56'E.
15 Apr 1983	M	4.3 m	Pirates Bay	43°01'S.,	147°56'E.
28 Dec 1983	M	5 m	Adventure Bay	43°19'S.,	147°20'E.
16 Nov 1984	M	2 m	Lauderdale	42°55'S.,	147°29'E.
19 Nov 1984	M	3.5 m	Macquarie Harbour	42°18'S.,	145°22'E.
25 Nov 1984	F	2.5 m	Margate	43°02'S.,	147°16'E.
27 Feb 1985		2 m	Southport	43°30'S.,	146°57'E.
1 Aug 1985		1.6 m	Dover	43°19'S.,	147°01'E.
11 Mar 1986	F		Cremorne	42°58'S.,	147°32'E.
Apr 1986			Hobart	42°53'S.,	147°19'E.
9 Oct 1988	F & Pup		Maatsuyker Island	43°39'S.,	146°17'E.

Contributions

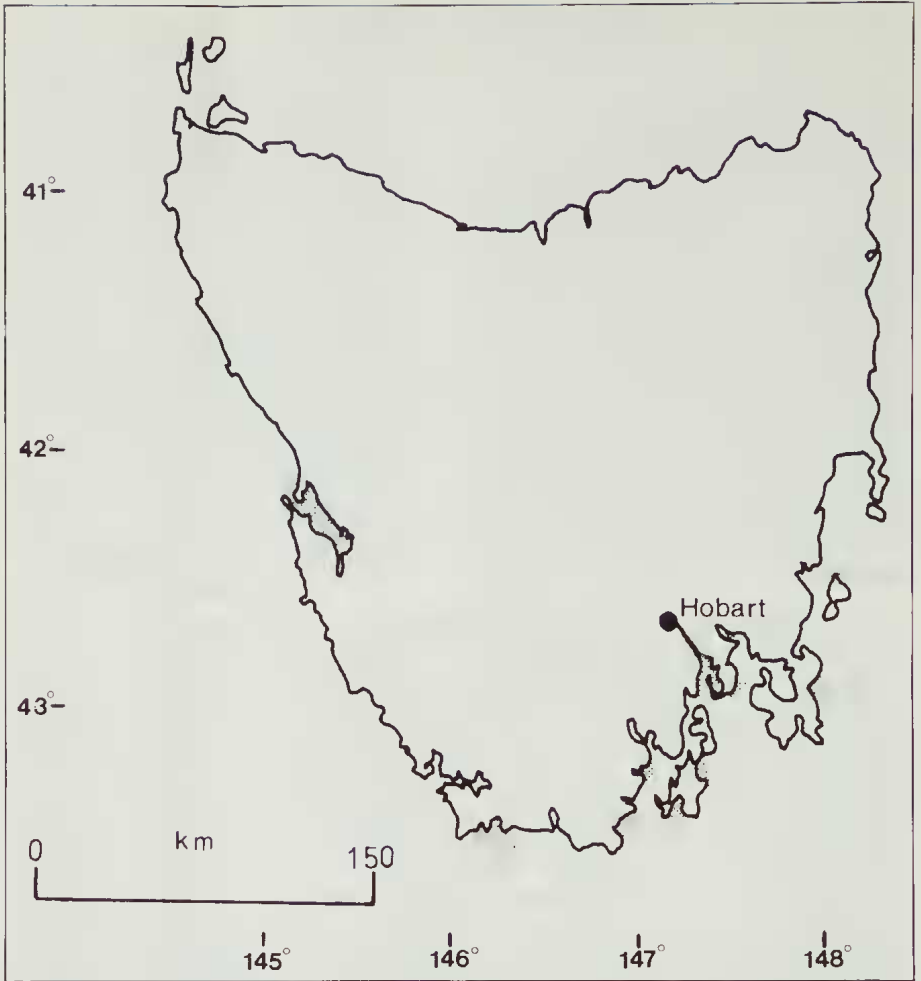


Fig. 1. Map of Tasmania. Sightings of live Elephant Seals are represented by stippled areas.